SUPERMAN
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"THE CREEPING DEATH"
A Clark Kent Mystery
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I don't care *who* you are; when *authority* shoves an angry finger in your face and dubs thee *"Murderer,"* lightning tears down your spine and thunder shakes your guts.
I WILL NOT HAVE ANOTHER DEAD BODY TURN UP ON MY SHIP, YOU ANIMAL!
Even when you're *innocent*...
CLARK KENT IS CONFINED TO QUARTERS UNTIL HE CAN BE TURNED OVER TO THE AUTHORITIES!
Even when you're *Superman*.
I used to pray for a vacation, but expect me to think *thrice* before going on another head trip like this one; the seasick case I call...
CREEPING DEATH
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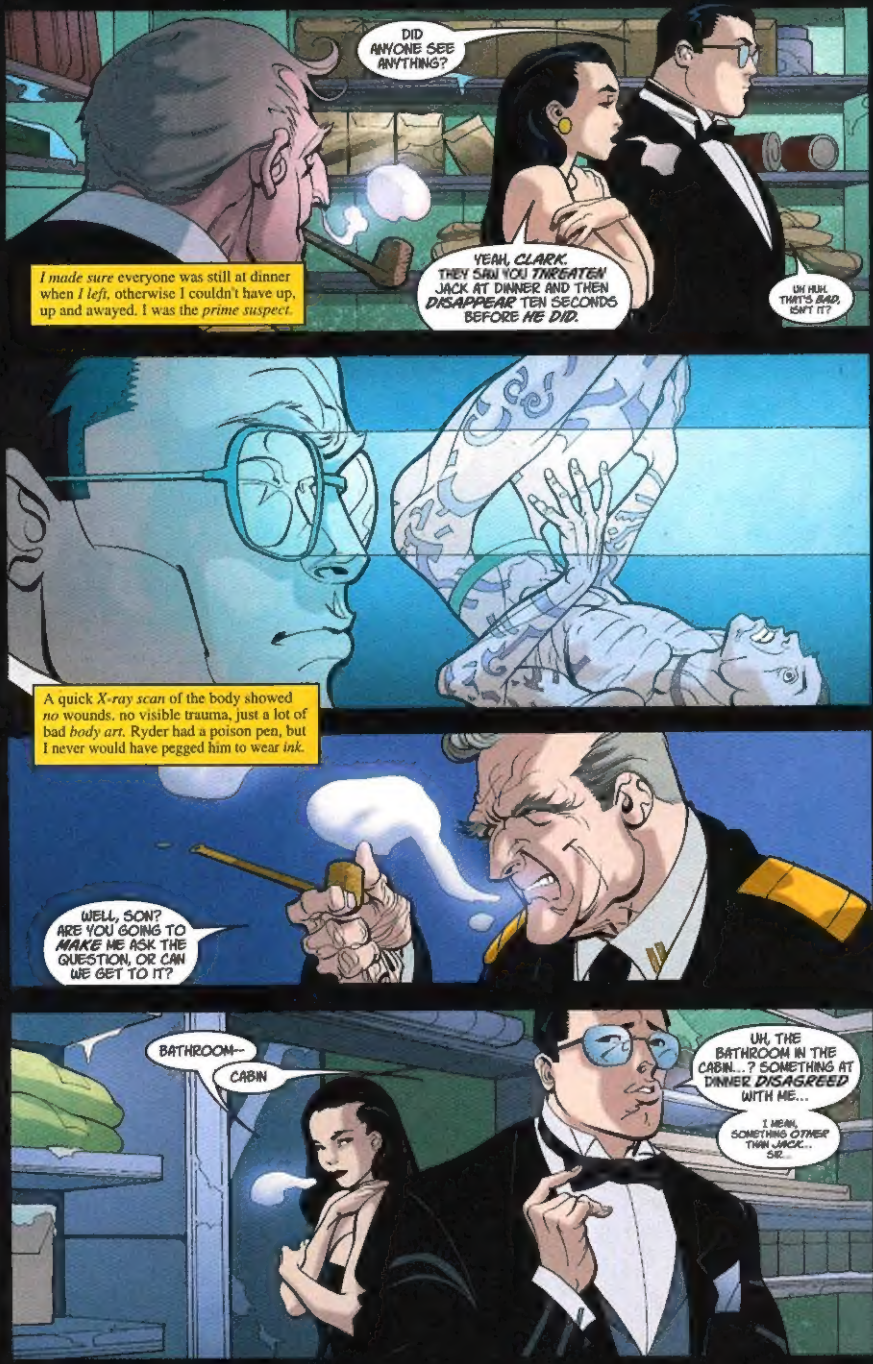
The Kents were *due* for a break, plain and simple. I wanted to give her the *moon* literally, but I knew Lois would make me see *stars* if I even suggested an off-world extravaganza again.
So we took a trip as far as her journalistic umbilical would stretch. A *cruise* through the Caribbean...
Catering to *journalists. Really.* One well-placed *wave*, and *WLEX News* would have finally sunk to as yet uncharted *lows*.
But I can be happy *anywhere*. I'm the tourist of *Steel*...
THIS IS PARADISE. KILL ME *NOW* SO I CAN DIE A HAPPY WOMAN.
KEEP YOUR EYES CLOSED, THEN. YOU WOULDN'T WANT THE LAST THING YOU SEE TO BE WOLF BLITZER IN A SPEEDO. YIKES.
...but I do have *one weakness*.
SPLASH
AND TODAY'S FORECAST—ONE *TINY* RAIN CLOUD WAS SPOTTED OVER LOIS LANE—
HEY!
ICED TO PERFECTION.
"Fellow reporter," "lead rival," and other euphemisms for Emperor of the jackass generation. *Jack Ryder.*

We dispensed with the usual pleasantries--
LOOK AT THE HAPPY COUPLE! WHAT'S YOUR SECRET? ZANAX?
DIDN'T THINK YOU COULD CHASE AN AMBULANCE ALL THE WAY OUT INTO THE OCEAN, RYDER.
--but our repartee was cut short by a long kiss.
JACK! WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN HIDING, STUD?
VANITY? HEH-LO... HE HAVE YOU MET ZOE?
Vanity Tadero. Hollywood gossip who locked lips with Ryder last summer. No one cared, so he dumped her on live TV.
Bimbo Du Jour took notice, as Vanity clearly planned, but before "Zoe" could manage a grunt--
SSSSSSHT
THIS GUY BIVING YOU SUFF, CLARK? I THOUGHT THEY SEARCHED THIS SHIP FOR RATS BACK AT PORT!
OH, SORRY, RYDER... I FORGOT YOU QUIT SMOKING. OOPS.
Harry Dobbs. Weak copywriter with a strong heart who was scooped by Ryder once too often back at The Daily Star.
C'MON, LOVER! GIVE US A KISS!
VANITY-- DOBBS-- ZOE!
It was a moment, and I'll admit... It caught me red-handed.
TAKE IT EASY, JACK--OH, AND BE CAREFUL--! FAIR COMPLEXION LIKE THAT IN THE CARIBBEAN SUN...
YOU DIDN'T.
OH, I DID... I'M ON VACATION.

Ryder wasn't the *only* one who got burned. As *fate* would have it, we were seated together for dinner.
HELL, I KNEW I WAS HOT, BUT THIS IS RIDICULOUS! AM I RIGHT OR AM I RIGHT, CAPTAIN YARDARM?
YARHOLA, SIR.
SIR YES SIR, CAPTAIN JARJAR. LOVED YOU IN "MENACE!" HOO-HA! PAINKILLERS AND CRUISE FOOD. KILLER BUZZ!
Two *hours*. Ryder drank like a fish and swore like a sailor. Even his gal pal Zoe was ready to jump ship.
BY ALL THAT'S HOLY, RYDER, IF YOU DON'T SHUT UP I'M GOING TO DROWN YOU IN YOUR CHAMPAGNE GLASS!
UH, HOW? YOU SAID THAT OUT LOUD.
Luckily, before Ryder could retort with a *sea shanty* featuring my *mother* and a hundred *drunken sailors*--
Disaster struck. A small fleet of trawlers got too friendly with a force three hurricane. I made my excuses...
And took in some fresh air as *Superman*.

Ten minutes. That's all it took to save the day and my sanity...
And cook up a smorgasbord of verbal smackdowns for my pal Jack.
But the joke was on me. Demitasse and baked Alaska had been swapped for *cell phones* and *laptops*. *That many* reporters passing on dessert could only mean one thing--
There was a *story* on board. Unfortunately...
That story was *me*... And *Jack Ryder*. He finally *shut up, permanently*.
Don't ask me who was *colder* at that moment, the frozen side of beef that used to be *Ryder* or my *wife*.
HAVE A NICE "WALK," SMALLVILLE? 'CAUSE YOU *STEPPED* IN IT *BIG TIME*.
ICE CREAM


DID ANYONE SEE ANYTHING?
I made sure everyone was still at dinner when *I left*, otherwise I couldn't have up, up and awayed. I was the *prime suspect*.
YEAH, CLARK. THEY SAW YOU *THREATEN* JACK AT DINNER AND THEN *DISAPPEAR* TEN SECONDS BEFORE *HE DID*.
UH HUH. THAT'S *BAD*, ISN'T IT?
A quick *X-ray scan* of the body showed *no* wounds, no visible trauma, just a lot of bad *body art*. Ryder had a poison pen, but I never would have pegged him to wear *ink*.
WELL, SON? ARE YOU GOING TO *MAKE* ME ASK THE QUESTION, OR CAN WE GET TO IT?
BATHROOM--
CABIN
UH, THE BATHROOM IN THE CABIN...? SOMETHING AT DINNER *DISAGREED* WITH ME...
I MEAN, SOMETHING OTHER THAN JACK... SIR...

The Captain sent me off, but he didn't buy what I was selling. He knew we were keeping a secret…because we were.
For her part, Lois skipped the guilt trip and went right into exploiting my misery.
BACK OFF, VULTURES! HE'S MY HUSBAND! IF HE KILLED ANYONE, I GET THE EXCLUSIVE!
SHE'S GOT A GOOD HEART, REALLY.
Everyone who ever *met* Jack hated him instantly, but we listed a few on board who held a special *loathing* for him…
Vanity Tadero's scene above decks could have been an appetizer before dinner.
Harry Dobbs wasn't the violent type, but how far can a man be pushed…?
It was a long shot, but *Zoe* the *Bimbo* didn't look as perky after Vanity's kiss… and who was her *brunette* pal?
The leads were as thin as the veal I turned down an hour before, so I decided on a different approach…

Ryder sailed *First Class* in a room big enough for his *ego and* both of the *chips* that towered over his shoulders.
A quick toss of the room and I came up with a lot of *empty...empty liquor bottles*, empty *drug vials*...
And an empty *needle*. Only there wasn't any drug residue inside it. Just *ink*. A home-grown *tattoo kit*.
I was pondering Jack's new hobby when twelve gauges of evidence caught my X-ray eye.
A *hunting* rifle loaded with *hallabrun darts*, quite literally *elephant tranquilizer* in the dosage I saw.
I didn't know what sort of *fishing* Ryder planned to do with that rifle, but before I could find out more--
AIEEEEEEEE

--someone netted Ryder's trophy girl.
It only took a second for Zoe's scream to become one with the night, and from the looks of her, her mind followed right behind.
The low slow hissing that passed for her breathing gave some comfort, but it didn't last...
I saw the *ink*. Tattoos similar to Ryder's, but different. Translucent. *Invisible* except when the light of the moon turned her skin to porcelain.
I was so transfixed by the skin puzzle before me I didn't think to hotfoot it out of there when Zoe's scream caught up to the rest of the ship.
For the first time since I was twelve, someone sent me to my room.

When you're a man with a *secret identity*, you do *not* want to be a murder suspect on a ship full of *reporters*.
My wife took great pains to explain this to me slowly, so that even a farmboy from Kansas could understand.
Did I mention that she has a good heart?
After a calm and thoughtful discussion of our options, we thought it best that *she* interview the next suspect.
It took Lois half of a gin and tonic and only one good "hair flip" to get Harry's story. Faster than a speeding bullet, that woman...
YEAH, I DID MY THING THIS MORNING, I WAS TRYING TO "HIT" RYDER BEFORE HE "HIT ME."
YOU WERE GOING TO *FIGHT* HIM?
DON'T YOU KNOW ABOUT HIS "HIT LIST"? HEH.. HE DOES IT AT ALL THESE STUPID THINGS.
RYDER WORKS HIS WAY AROUND TO ALL THE PEOPLE WHO HE FELT WRONGED BY AND BLOWS UP THEIR SPOT WANTED TO GET MINE IN FIRST.
YOU KNOW WHO'S ON THAT LIST?
YOU'D BE SURPRISED... HEH... OR MAYBE YOU *WOULDN'T*.

Naturally, it was all of five minutes before I went stir crazy and broke curfew To spend some time with *mother woman.*
HE WAS A *HORRIBLE* MAN, WASN'T HE? EVIL, EVEN. DID I SAY *FETID?*
AT LEAST YOU'RE NOT *BITTER,* VANITY
HA! I *DESPISED* JACK. I SPENT MANY NIGHTS PLANNING WAYS TO *SHATTER* HIM AND HIS CAREER
BUT NOTHING SEEMED *PAINFUL* ENOUGH FOR HIM, SO I GAVE UP REVENGE FANTASIES FOR *LENT*
WOULD YOU LIKE TO KNOW WHAT I FANTASIZE ABOUT *INSTEAD?*
The only *racing heartbeat* I could pick up was my *own.* Vanity wasn't a *lying,* cold-blooded killer
No, *definitely* hot-blooded. I strained my *super hearing* to make sure *Lois* wasn't about to find me in a compromising situation when
A compromising situation found me. Zoe's *"friend"*
I took my cue and left Vanity with an unsmoked cigarette and half a glass of warm milk Maybe it'd help put her to sleep

Under the sideboats, Zoe's friend had the eyes of a drowning woman. She called herself *Rita* and floated me a line
DON'T KNOW WHY I *THINK* I CAN TRUST YOU.
APPARENTLY, YOU'RE ON A *SHORT LIST.*
YOU HAVE... A PURE *AURA.* I CAN SEE THOSE THINGS. ZOE AND I ARE INTO WELL, I GUESS YOU CALL IT *ARCANUM. WITCHCRAFT--*
RITA, DO YOU KNOW WHO'S BEHIND THE ATTACKS?
NOT *WHO... WHAT.*
I THINK. . I THINK JACK HAD ZOE CAST A SUMMONS TO A.. A *DEMON.*
SEE, HE *HIRED* HER TO COME ALONG ON THIS CRUISE TO--
KENT! THERE HE IS!
Rita made for the shadows between "there" and "is" .
DON'T FIGHT, KENT IT WILL BE EASIER ON EVERYONE IF YOU JUST COME WITH.
Leaving *me, myself* and *I* swinging alone in the wind

They found Harry when something *wet* dripped out of him and landed on Barbara Walters' head from twenty feet up.
Rita's truncated story rushed through me along with the stink of sea filth as I calculated what it would take to suspend a man of 220 from the ceiling.
Nothing *human* could have done this.
Oh Captain my Captain wasn't so certain.
Now he had *"evidence,"* and, he added, people had seen Harry with my *wife* speaking in whispers.
YOU'RE A BIG FELLA, KENT... HOW MUCH CAN YOU LIFT?
CLARK KENT
LOIS LANE
HARRY DOBBS
VANITY TADERO
The *list* itself meant *nothing*, aside from the fact that one of the three *victims* was on it.
And so was *Lois*.

First mate *Smiley* called me a *murderer* despite my pointing out that my name was *also* on the list--
And locked me in my *room* alone with my thoughts. Said thoughts were *not* very pleasant
There are very few things walking this Earth that I can't *handle* and *demons* would top that list
All of the attacks have been *ritualistic* in nature, down to the *ink*. *Rita* claims Zoe is some sort of *witch*--
Had Ryder *actually* used Zoe to summon a killer from beyond? Was *that* the reason for the *elephant gun* in his room?
And *why*? The ever present *why*?
For a while, I *stare* through solid steel at those *tattoos*, as if they're a roadmap to Ryder's killer. When--
FFFFFF
H-HONEY?

HEART LOST
HELP
Lois felt *empty*, weightless as she collapsed into me. Like the others, *physically* unharmed but *lost* somehow.
BODY BODY BODY
Took me a second to get over my *shock* and realize it wasn't *her* body she was worried about.
I had to be

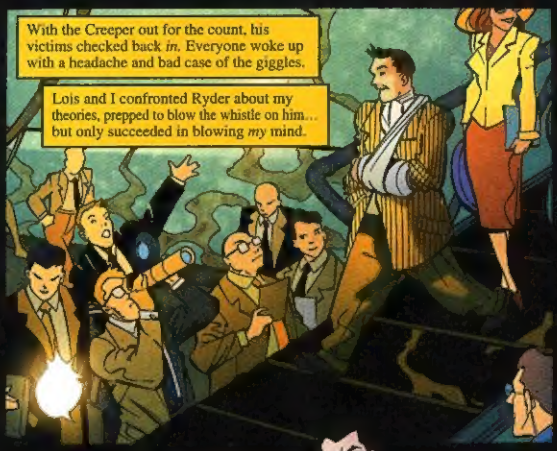
I cursed myself *once* for choosing the *scenic route* over smashing through the ship's hull
A *secret identity* doesn't mean much if your *wife* is a *zombie*, and with the *occult* every *second* means the difference between *afterlife* and *near-death*
I traded *guilt* for *dread* when I picked up the trail heading for the upper decks. Whatever had Ryder was *not* moving like a human being
HA HAHAHAAAAHAHAHA
The laughter splinters my thoughts like dry tinder
Suddenly I'm *sick* on it I can't breathe I can't see I'm going to die

I'm going to die
Smell hopelessness
Feel sickness near
Madness
Eye gouge death unleashed
The Creeper.
But not the Creeper
Not this thing
Primal other
Horror
Horror.

Instinct
Something animal in me takes over just before I went *vegetable* Lucky break
Instant the laughter chokes back, the *facts* fill the vacuum
Magic "Hit List" Summoning Elephant gun
Demon
Ryder summoning the Creeper to take out the people on the list, but something went wrong--
A few more bodyblows manage to hurt him before I notice something that takes my *breath away*
Tattoos on the *victims* were all left by the *Creeper* hasty, sloppy in that moonlight *ink*
Cuts on *Ryder's body* were drawn *first* and they match the marks on the Creeper's body *exactly*
I'm no Dark Knight Detective But I'd bet the farm *and* the ranch

Jack Ryder is the *Creeper.*
PKOWW PKOWW
HELP ME!
HOLY WATER! THERE'S HOLY WATER MIXED WITH THE TRANQ--!
Ryder hires *Zoe* to cast a Summoning spell...that pulls out his *inner demons.*
HAHAHAHAHAHA
Surprise, surprise, something goes wrong with this love fest. The "demon" takes out his handler *and* the one lady who can uncast the spell...
Because Creeper's found life on the sea, and doesn't want to return to port of call.
Who would? We've all seen what passes for hygeine with Ryder.

In all honesty, if it were a fair trade between *Ryder* and the creeping manifestation of insanity wrapping its tendrils around my neck--
I think I'd have taken strangulation and called it a *wash*.
But there were *innocents* involved, my *wife* among them... and I *had* to know *"why?"*
Through the *laughter* and the *shrieking* and *whispers* that came from his skin to make you *forget* tomorrow would come...
HAHA HA HA HA
That *one question* was enough to keep my head *straight*--
--and my *aim true*.
Only *truth* can stop *madness*... And you can *quote* me on that.


With the Creeper out for the count, his victims checked back *in*. Everyone woke up with a headache and bad case of the giggles.
Lois and I confronted Ryder about my theories, prepped to blow the whistle on him... but only succeeded in blowing *my* mind.

I WAS BACKING ON SOME *PIDDLY-DEMON* MAKING AN APPEARANCE. A LITTLE TUSSLE, AND WHAM-BAM-THANK YOU MA'AM--
I TAKE HIM OUT. I'M THE HERO OF MY *OWN STORY.*

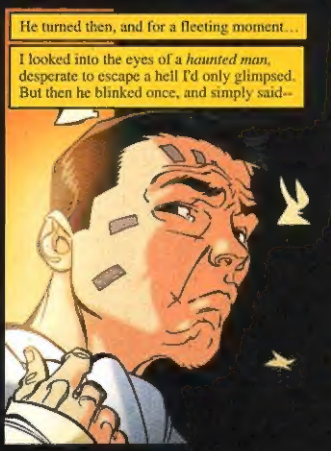
YOU ALMOST *KILLED* INNOCENT PEOPLE FOR A *STORY?!*
I DIDN'T KNOW IT WAS GONNA GO OFF-SCRIPT! FACT HE WENT DOWN MY "HIT LIST" WAS *COINCIDENCE* OR SOMETHING...
WISH I HAD THOUGHT OF IT. I WAS JUST GONNA GIVE IN EVERYONE'S MIDDLEBITES...
YOU'RE A SICK MAN, JACK. I'M TAKING YOU DOWN.

GO FOR IT. LET'S SEE HOW WELL YOUR *STORY* FLIES WITH *NO WITNESSES.* I SPENT A *FORTUNE* ON ZOE. HER AN RITA WON'T SAY *BOO,* NOT EVEN ON HALLOWEEN.
PLUS NO ONE WAS *REALLY* HURT, AND BESIDES, THIS THING IS PRACTICALLY *YOUR FAULT.* I GOT THE IDEA FROM *YOU.*

COME AGAIN?

EVERYONE *KNOWS* A CHUMP FROM SMALLVILLE DOESN'T GET WHERE YOU GOT IN JOURNALISM WITHOUT A *RABBI.*
YOU CUT A DEAL WITH *SUPERMAN* BEFORE HE WAS SOMEBODY, AND *BOOM,* INSTANT *CAREER.*
YOU'RE AN *INSPIRATION,* KENT. LET'S LEAVE IT AT THAT.
I HAVE A *BOOK* TO GO WRITE.

Without the *witches*, there was no good way to pin the case on *Ryder*, but I wasn't about to let him off clean.
I grabbed his arm tightly, and hissed. "That *thing* inside you is going to get someone *killed*, Jack…at least you can admit you need it *out* of your life!"


He turned then, and for a fleeting moment…
I looked into the eyes of a *haunted man*, desperate to escape a hell I'd only glimpsed. But then he blinked once, and simply said--

"I got no idea what you're on about, Kent. I'm not the Creeper…he's just a genie I borrowed from someone else's bottle."
His heart didn't skip a beat. He didn't sweat and his pupils didn't flinch. He was telling the truth…or *believing* one heck of a *lie*.
Before I sank in my own anger, *Lois* threw me a line. "Let him have this one, Clark…let him enjoy the *spotlight*, because as far as I'm concerned…"
"He just picked up two more *shadows*. We'll get that *creep*. We'll get him."
Did I mention she has a good heart?
THE END